

A TRANSACTION IN SEWING MACHINES

By
Earl Derr Biggers

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NO, sir," said Mr. Peter Powers firmly, "I don't believe in mixin' things. Everythin' in the world's mixed now. You see joy an' sorrow, happiness an' marriage, or some other trouble, graftin' an' church-goin', all marchin' hand in hand. It ain't right, I say, an' I make it a rule never to mix nothin'. That's why I've said 'beer' every one o' the five times you've asked me to have a drink, an' that's why I'd go on sayin' 'beer' if you was to ask me five hundred more times."

I nodded to the waiter, and Mr. Powers smiled genially.

"Generosity," he continued, "is your strong point, an' that's how you come to remind me o' George Barber. George was the mos' generous man I ever see, though you're a close second, an' who knows but you'll beat him out in the end? Every pay-day George acted more an' more like Carnegie, only he

ested he fergot the liquid refreshments. Well, we set down, an' George took up his sad, sad story.

"Six months ago," he says, "I was a happy man—first mate of a tramp steamer carryin' bananas between a lot o' little South American republics an' New York. Then one day a rich general down there in the tropic climes got the idee that he ought to be president o' the pink spot on the map called his country. He an' our captain met; money talked, as is his habit, an' when next we left New York it was with ten thousand rifles stowed away below, in the name o' liberty as represented by the general. Everythin' had been arranged by his agents; all we did was to take the boxes from a shady wharf on a dark night an' hide 'em away from anxious eyes. So we steamed South, to aid an' abet a Humpty-Dumpty president at havin' a great fall.

"But he didn't. Oh, it's a sad tale. We anchored two miles up a forsaken, smelly river one moonlight night, an' saw the ragged army o' tyrant stranglers

crous. Them sewin'-machines—a thousand o' 'em—are on board this yacht. In a evil minute, urged on by my kindness o' heart an' a offer of a third what I get fer 'em, I agreed to come up here in the general's yacht an' sell 'em off fer him."

"Well, why don't you?" I says.

"Why don't I?" says George, with tears in his eyes. "That's it, why don't I? A thousand white elephants on board this yacht would be easier disposed of. A thousand diamond tiaras disappearin' from the New York wharf wouldn't have caused more stir among the police. The government has taken charge o' the rifles, an' now they're lookin' fer the machines. They want everything. As sure as I steal into a city an' get ready for bargain day on the yacht, the newspapers come out with big headlines about new clues in the case. Why don't they forget it? Ain't there no other news but lost sewin'-machines?"

"The thing to do," I says, slow an' careful, "is to

desire on board a yacht. Why, George, they'll flock here like—like birds. We'll be hailed as public benefactors. They'll build us a statue at the mouth o' this harbor."

"Under water," growls George.

"You wait an' see," I tells him.

George waited, an' he saw. I wish I could describe the scene that followed. If I had one more drink mebbe I could. Thank you—much obliged. The first trip the waterman made he brought five women, an' pretty soon lady shoppers was thicker on that deck than in a department store the day before Christmas. George got out some of the machines, an' some o' the ladies who had brought along implements fer sewin' set down an' sewed, accordin' to George's offer in the ads. You won't guess what a pretty scene it made, with the ladies talkin' a blue streak, an' the machines a-buzzin', an' George's head buzzin' too, because o' the questions they asked.

One by one they came an' ordered an' went away. I could hear George sayin': "Yes'm, pay on delivery to-night," an' then he'd come over to where I was sittin' by the rail an' punch me like he was ringin' up the sale on a cash register, an' shriek low fer joy. "Another gone," he'd say; "Peter, this is your work, God bless you!"

It began to get late, an' the crowd thinned out. They was just five left, the old lady with the green specs, an' old maid who wouldn't have been satisfied with a solid gold machine set with diamonds, a butcher's wife whose social standin' wouldn't allow her to buy nothin' inferior, an' two young married women who couldn't decide. George comes over to me.

"Two hundred and eighty-three sold!" he says. "If you'd 'a' told me yesterday such luck was waitin' fer me, I'd 'a' jammed the lie down your throat. To-night I'll be a rich man. Two hundred and eighty-three, an' mebbe some more."

"Yes, mebbe some more," I says, "fer here comes the waterman with another customer."

George smiled and says: "That's good," an' turned to look at the waterman's skiff, not a hundred yards away. Then his face went white an' he trembled all over. At that minute the waterman's passenger, a tall, homely woman, stood up in the stern o' the boat an' made some remarks, emphasizin' her words by wavin' a umbrella vigorously.

"Good Lord!" says George in a broken voice, "she's seen me."

"Well, why not?" says I, surprised.

"Why not?" shrieked George. "Why not, you fool? She's my wife, that's why not."

"You never told me," I says sadly.

"This ain't no time fer family history," he says, an' rushes below. I followed. The engineer was right there, but George didn't notice him. He started the yacht himself.

"Look here," I hollered, "they's five women aboard this boat what belong ashore. Are you mad, George?"

"No," says George, "I'm doin' the only sane thing, as you'd know if you'd ever met my wife. Eight years ago I left her, an' she's been after me ever since. Once she gets me, I'm a goner. I was a fool fer comin' to this town, she used to live here when she was a girl. Go up on the bridge an' keep her headed to sea, Jim," he says to one o' the men.

"Where are we goin'?" I asks.

"Siberia, Hindoostan, Algiers, anywhere," says George, "anywhere, I ain't sure where," he says. "I only know we're goin' an' we're goin' quick."

"Well, put on your armor," I says, "an' we'll go on deck."

I think I'll need another drink to describe the scene that met our eyes there. Thanks! Have you ever faced five cryin'-mad women you've just kidnapped? No? Well, I guess they ain't no use tryin' to give you any idee o' the way they acted.

"You're right, Peter," says George, "you're right." "Of course I am," I says, "an' I know the place, too. Up on the Maine coast they's a little town called Grimport that even the Lord thinks has topped off into the sea. What alls you, George?"

"I've heard of it," says George, choking over his drink.

"That's queer," says I. "I didn't suppose any man on earth had heard of it."

"A—friend—of mine once lived there," says George.

"No friend o' mine has lived there, or ever could, an' still be a friend," I says, "but here's my plan. Why not run up there fer one day, pass round bills in the mornin' invitin' all ladies to come on board in the afternoon an' view the machines we're almost givin' away, sell all we can, deliver 'em an' collect the money, an' then fit away before suspicion wakes? I'll go with you, George. I'm out of a berth, an' I always did like to be near you, anyhow."

George's gratitude at my offerin' to go along was touchin' to see, an' he hunts up the crew, orderin' them to start at once. We steamed away north, an' all that night George set up in the cabin, deaf to the swearin' o' the mate, writin' advertisements fer sewin'-machines that was artistic triumphs. He said the machines was bought by a missionary society fer the heathen in Africa, but when they was delivered the heathen wouldn't have 'em, because they didn't like to sew, an' didn't wear clothes, anyhow.

One o' the crew that was once a sign-painter in San Francisco printed George's ads on ten big boards, an' the mornin' we got to Grimport we took 'em ashore an' put 'em up where they couldn't help bein' seen. I tried to get George to tie up to the docks, but he was set on anchorin' out in the harbor. We could get under way quicker if anything happened, he said, an' he was so afraid o' trouble that he went ashore an' hired a waterman to carry the ladies to an' from the yacht, not wantin' to use our own boat fer the purpose.

At one o'clock that afternoon we set down to wait fer customers. George was a little nervous about the outcome o' the plan, so I cheers him up a bit.

"Think of it," I says, "in this deserted village there's over a thousand women, heart-sick an' hungerin' fer a bargain sale. Few, if any, have come into their lives. An' now we bring 'em their heart's

leave you."

"An' so," finished Mr. Peter Powers, "me an' George Barber parted fer the last time. It's been three long years since I seen him, an' him the mos' generous man I know. No, you haven't beat him out; I'd like to say you had, but loyalty to poor old George won't let me."

I said good-by to poor old George's faithful friend, and started out. Near the door I met a waiter I knew.

"Who is this Peter Powers?" I asked.

The waiter smiled. "He's a carpenter," he said, "and he lives over in Brooklyn."

"But he's been on the water a great deal," I protested.

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never wasted no money on books. It was a real pleasure to sit near him in a cafe, with a good spy waiter close at hand. Yes, sir, you remind me o' George in a good many ways. He didn't have a very intelligent face, but he knew enough not to have heart failure whenever the waiter brought the checks."

He drank.

"It's long since I seen poor George," he went on, feelin'ly, "three long years since the time him an' me tried to get rid o' a thousand sewin'-machines that had come into our lives accidental like. Unusual machines they was, too, always causin' trouble, an' before we got 'em off our hands we'd kidnapped half the female population o' a little New England town. Mebbe you'll like to hear about it?"

I consulted my pocket, and again nodded to the waiter. With this slight encouragement Mr. Powers began:

On one of the big North River docks in New York I struck old George Barber, always so jolly an' gay; an' the look in his eyes was sad, an' his smile o' greeting was the kind that does service at funerals.

"I'm in trouble, Peter," he says to me, low an' tearful.

"I'm sorry, George," says I, with the true ring in my voice; fer I thought he was broke, an' to meet the most generous man you know an' find he has no money is the most mutual sorrow there is.

"See that fancy yacht?" he says, pointing to the harbor. An' there, right in among the dirty tugs an' tramp steamers an' the like, was the prettiest little boat afloat. Her brasses an' awnins flashed in the sun, an' she was puffin' an' snortin' an' turnin' up her nose at the craft around her fer all the world like Mrs. Van Dusen visitin' the poorhouse.

"Ain't she the beauty?" I remarks.

George sighed. "I'm in command," he says.

I started to congratulate him, but he got behind the post he'd been leanin' against and held up his hand.

"Don't," says he. "That would be the last straw. On board that fancy yacht is the cause o' all my worry. Peter Powers, if you'd told me when last we met that my generosity an' kind nature was goin' to get me in all this trouble, I'd 'a' turned different on the spot."

"I'm glad I didn't, then," I says heartily.

"Yes," he answers, "I suppose it was better to let me live in ignorance. But it was a awful blow when it fell." He leans toward me. "Come on board," he whispers like the villain in the show, "we might be heard here. Come, an' I'll tell you the story o' my life."

We was rowed out to the yacht, an' once in the cabin I was pleased to see that George was himself again, fer I had only just set down when he put some bottles an' glasses on the table. That was George—that was the secret o' his generosity. The trouble he was in, the story he had to tell—or the one someone else was tellin'—never got him so inter-

camped on the shore. The general lent talk to the unloading—he was a fat man full o' whiskey an' excitement. When the boxes was all ashore he grabbed an ax an' mounted one o' 'em. Downin' tyrants was his subject; that an' givin' liberty a fair field. Also he mentioned that he had waited long fer them rifles. A fuzzy atmosphere was crawlin' into our lungs an' chokin' us, so we told him to cut it short. Then he opened a box, an' next he swore—in Spanish.

"Well, Peter, there ain't no use makin' a mystery o' it. Inside that box was a neat little sewin'-machine. Inside the next ten, twenty, thirty, up to one thousand boxes the general began opening they was sewin'-machines. Don't ask me how they got there—I don't know. The general set down on a box an' cried, an' between sobs he asked us what we thought he was runnin'—a sewin' circle or a war. Our captain tried to tell him they was a new kind o' machine gun, but the old boy wouldn't be cheered.

"This ain't no women's war," he says.

"Well," says Murry, the captain, "it was pretty dark that night on the wharf. An' these look a lot like the boxes we was told to take on. They was a few more than we expected, but we thought you couldn't have any too many—rifles."

"At mention o' that word the general stood up an' drew on his vocabulary fer some o' the choicest words I ever hear used. Then he set down an' cried some more.

"You fight too much in these blame' picture-book countries anyhow," says Murry, mad about the names. "Sometime when I can afford it I'm goin' to take a day off an' spank this seat o' war. It's muddy here, he goes on, 'an' I don't like the cries o' the birds an' beasts, nor the wild wet breeze comin' up from the swamp. I believe I'm catchin' cold. I'm goin' back on board."

"The general grabs him. 'The rifles?' he says.

"I'm sorry," says Murry, who'd got most of his pay for the job before startin' in; "I'm very sorry, but someone else probably has 'em now. An' it wouldn't be safe to inquire. Keep the machines," he says, 'they'll come in handy round the camp. Some rainy day when it's too wet to fight let the men stay at home an' do a little dressmakin'.' They need new clothes," he says.

"Two minutes' thinkin' convinced the general that revolutions was too expensive just then, an' that he'd better wait till they was cheaper. He tells his army to go home, an' forget it, in a 'there'll-be-no-war-to-night' speech. We took him an' the machines to the capital city, where he got back his job of Secretary o' War, with no questions asked. He's there now, quietly waitin' fer a chance to shoot the president under the table at a cabinet meeting."

That, sir, is the story George had to tell, and as he stopped to fill my glass I says to him: "George," says I, "George, what has all this to do with you an' your trouble?"

"My trouble," says George, "is that I'm too gen-

go somewhere an' sell them machines to somebody." George looks disappointed. "I'd got that far myself," he says.

"Yes," I says, "but you ain't been usin' common sense in carryin' out the plan. You've been tryin' to sell what I suppose a cruel justice calls stolen goods in the land o' arclights an' cafes, where crime is wrote large in the headlines, an' there's suspicion in the eye of your brother if you ask him the time. It's the simple life fer yours. It's some little village alone an' forgotten by the sea, where hearts is unsuspectin', an' manners an' customs—especially customs—ain't too exactin'."

"You're right, Peter," says George, "you're right."

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